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ABSTRACT

Although experts overwhelmingly support the idea of using assessment to improve college instruction, most testing programs call for summative evaluation or accountability rather than formative evaluation. In using assessment to improve instruction it is essential to examine what decisions should be made in order to improve instruction. Institutional assessment needs to be accompanied by classroom assessment, with faculty members involved in getting feedback from students on the effectiveness of their teaching. Additional training is recommended for the teachers. Classroom assessment will add to our knowledge about teaching and its relationship to learning. In conclusion, the type of assessment information collected should be related to the type of decisions made. Since teachers make decisions about instruction, information should be collected which is helpful in making classroom decisions. The information should be collected in the classroom, close to the source of potential action. (GDC)

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Using Assessment to Improve Instruction

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According to the latest *Campus Trends* report issued by the American Council on Education (El-Khawas, 1986), three-fourths of all college administrators think that assessment is a good idea whose time has come. That's interesting, but even more interesting is the finding that almost all college administrators (91 percent) think that assessment should be linked to instructional improvement. Most authorities on the subject of assessment share that conviction. Turnbull (1985, p.25) observes that "the over-riding purpose of gathering data is to provide a basis for improving instruction, rather than keeping score or allocating blame." And the report just issued by the Education Commission of the States (1986, p.32) asserts that "Assessment should not be an end in itself. Rather it should be an integral part of an institution's strategy to improve teaching and learning. . . ."

In the jargon of the trade, the call for formative evaluation is loud and clear. Ironically, practically all of the proposals and practices in assessment today involve summative evaluation. We hear a lot about how institutional assessment and statewide testing will show us what is wrong and make educators more accountable, but there are few proposals for formative evaluation to show us how to improve education in process. The report just issued by the National Governors' Association, for example, is entitled *Time For Results*, and it is a call for summative, bottom-line accountability. While formulative evaluation gets the praise, summative evaluation gets the votes.

If we are to use assessment to improve the quality of education, perhaps the most important question for me to address is what decisions should be made in order to improve instruction. Stated that way, it's not a question that most college administrators are ready to grapple with because instruction generally takes place in the classroom, and the

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classroom is considered holy ground in academe. One group of optimistic assessors observe that, "Assessment seems to be loitering expectantly in the corridors of higher education, thereby reinforcing the hope that it will soon enter the classroom to serve the learner" (Loacker, Cromwell & O'Brien, 1986, p. 47). At the moment, I don't see any signs that anyone is ready to fling open the classroom door and invite the assessors in. In fact, I suspect that one reason for today's high interest in institutional assessment is that it is one way of demanding attention to the quality of student learning without actually entering the classroom. We in higher education have been especially reluctant to address the classroom performance of teachers for a number of reasons.

In the first place, we equate academic freedom with the sanctity of the classroom, and there is a tradition of restraint in probing too deeply what goes on there. Moreover, college teachers are authorities in their specialties. No one else in the institution knows quite as much about their particular subject as they do, and there is an understandable reluctance to tell faculty what or how to teach. And finally, there are some age-old questions that have not been answered to the satisfaction of many. What constitutes effective teaching? Who should evaluate college teachers and how? Can good teaching be recognized and appropriately rewarded?

If a major purpose of assessment is to improve instruction, can we use the results of assessment to do that? It doesn't seem very likely that we are going to reward individual teachers on the extent to which they demonstrate that they can "teach to the test," thereby pegging teachers' salaries to the scores of their students on assessment measures. Most people, I think, assume that assessment will improve instruction by documenting the strengths and weaknesses of student performance. Teachers will then use the results of the institutional assessment to take appropriate action. In higher education, "taking appropriate action" usually means making collective decisions about *what* is taught, i.e., about the curriculum. It rarely means doing anything about *how* it is taught. But *how* students are taught lies at the heart of quality education. It makes the difference between a lifelong learner and a grade grubber, between enthusiasm for learning and indifference to it, between an educated society and a credentialed one.

A few colleges, such as Alverno, with extensive experience and heavy faculty involvement in assessment, have managed to make a profound impact on teaching (see, for example, Loacker, et al, 1986), but most colleges, I predict, will conduct their assessment, add a few more course requirements, tighten academic standards, and see that students toe the

line. Assessment as currently conceived will probably stop short of the classroom door, doing little to improve the quality of instruction in the average classroom.

It is for this reason that I think institutional assessment needs to be accompanied by classroom assessment if we are to achieve long-term improvement in higher education. I have proposed elsewhere (Cross, 1986 a,b) the development of a new set of skills and tools that I call "classroom research." Its purpose is to help college teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching. The idea is to get faculty members involved *as individuals* in getting feedback from students on what they are learning in *that* classroom during *that* semester. Institutional assessment, in contrast, provides feedback on student learning college-wide, over a period of years, to faculty perceived as a team.

Ideally, a college is a community working in harmony toward common ends. Practically, it is a collection of individuals with maximum freedom to do their own thing, hopefully as well as they know how. The problem is that many college teachers really don't know how to teach very well. Typically, they have no training for teaching, and they have no one to talk with about it. While most now get student evaluations at the end of the semester (Erickson, 1985), they don't find the ratings very helpful in making changes in teaching methods (Clift and Imrie, 1980), and few have any skills for finding out what students are learning in their classrooms. Most are not even very proficient at getting maximum feedback on student learning from those two stalwarts of academe, final exams and term papers.

Thus, I contend that the most important decision that an institution can make regarding assessment is to explicitly move some of the decision-making into classrooms by giving teachers the necessary training and tools to assess what students are learning from them in the classroom.

Teacher involvement in classroom assessment is both necessary and desireable for a number of reasons.

First, it is by no means certain that a given teacher, say a professor of sociology, faced with results showing that students score below what might be expected on a test of social science will a) accept any personal responsibility for it or b) know what to do about it. One likely result of current efforts to measure "value-added" college-wide is to urge everyone to "teach to the test." That's not bad if the test truly measures the teaching aspirations of the college, but the better the test, i.e., the more it measures student growth and development, the more important teaching skill becomes. Many professors may discover that they don't know how

to "teach to a test" of personal or cognitive development.

One of the better ways to develop teaching skill is to provide feedback on what students are learning as a result of a given teacher's efforts. Realistically, the only way that can be done in higher education is to make the teacher responsible for formulating his or her teaching goals and assessing the results.

My second reason for encouraging classroom assessment is to add to our knowledge about teaching and its relationship to learning. As a profession, we don't know much about how to improve instruction. We struggle with faculty development programs and with disseminating the findings from research on teaching effectiveness, but most faculty teach as they were taught, and we're not sure how, or whether, to help them do differently.

There is a great deal of research on student evaluations of teaching and on teaching effectiveness. We know, for example, that college students are pretty good evaluators of teaching. They tend to give high marks to teachers from whom they learn the most (Centra, 1977; Cohen, 1982), they are reasonably unbiased, consistent over time, and in agreement with each other and with faculty evaluators (Gaff & Wilson, 1971).

Measures other than student evaluations also show agreement on the identification of effective college teachers. By this time, there has been enough research on teacher effectiveness that we can say with confidence that good teachers know their subject and their students. They are concerned about students, well-prepared, lucid, enthusiastic, available, and able to stimulate student interest and encourage their involvement in the work of the class (Abrami, 1985; Feldman, 1976; Kulik & McKeachie, 1975). Those are the results of literally hundreds of studies, and credible as they are, they are not very helpful to teachers. Even researchers who are presumably familiar with the research find it difficult to use the findings to improve their own teaching, and I know of no evidence that suggests that educational researchers are better teachers than those less well informed about research. While practitioners have been blamed for their failure to apply research, and researchers are regularly taken to task for failing to study questions that are relevant to teachers, the gap between research and practice is the fault of neither.

Educational research, with its search for general truths that hold across all classrooms, is not designed to address the situation-specific questions that teachers have. What a teacher wants to know is how his or her behavior affects the learning of a known group of students, studying a specific learning topic, under known conditions. But most research is

designed to control or eliminate those elements that pertain to a specific situation, and few researchers can afford to produce custom-designed research. By and large, the purpose of research in the social sciences is to push back the frontiers of knowledge and to build the foundations for understanding.

John Dewey (1929, p.19) wrote almost 60 years ago that "no conclusion of scientific research can be converted into an immediate rule of educational art." Research on teaching and learning is simply too large and complex to extract findings that can be easily disseminated to teachers as rules to improve teaching practices (Fenstermacher, 1982).

Donald Schon (1983) contends, in his new and provocative little book entitled *The Reflective Practitioner*, that research has done little to improve practice in any of the professions. In fact, he says, universities pursue "a view of knowledge that fosters selective inattention to practical competence and professional artistry" (p. vii). He calls for us to put aside the notion that "intelligent practice is an *application* of knowledge to instrumental decisions" (p.50) and instead to help professionals gain insight into their practice through an ongoing process of reflecting on what they know and articulating their intuitive thinking.

While it seems to me that Schon's reflection-in-action offers useful new perspectives on research to improve practice, I think it is both possible and desirable for teachers to collect and use both "hard" and "soft" data on student learning. Assessment designed for the improvement of teaching should be situation-specific, and it should provide immediate and useful feedback on what students are learning.

Situation-specific research may, at first blush, appear to result in knowledge with extremely limited usefulness to the profession of teaching, but my guess is that the exchange of knowledge from many specific classrooms will give teachers more useful insight into the teaching/learning process than the search for generalization across a "representative sample" of students, teachers, and subject matters. In any event, I think it highly likely that the knowledge gained from *doing* research is more likely to be used than that gained from *reading about* research.

My third and final reason for thinking that classroom assessment should be built into assessment programs, is to improve faculty morale through intellectual stimulation that is relevant to teaching. Unfortunately, the current lull in faculty hiring has convinced some institutions, historically committed to excellent teaching, that they should boost their academic prestige by hiring research faculties. The more likely result is that, as a society, we will sacrifice good teaching colleges for mediocre

research universities.

But so-called teaching institutions do have a problem in keeping a teaching faculty fresh and intellectually challenged. Heavy teaching loads tend to become repetitive, boring, and lacking in the intellectual stimulation that graduate students headed for careers in academe are taught to expect. Last fall's issue of *Change* magazine (September/October, 1985) presented a dismal picture of widespread demoralization of college teachers and pointed to what might be called the Rodney Dangerfield syndrome, "Teaching don't get no respect." If we are to make teaching institutions proud of their mission and to improve the status of teaching as a profession, we need to supply the tools for self-assessment and self-improvement, for those are the marks of a profession. Institutional assessment and state-wide assessment both carry implications of monitoring professional performance. Classroom assessment, carried out by teachers themselves, treats teachers as the professionals we want them to be.

In conclusion, one of the first rules of assessment, it seems to me, should be that the type of assessment information collected should be related to the type of decisions that it is possible to make. Since decisions about instruction are made by teachers, assessment should include information helpful in making decisions in the classroom. As a corollary, information should be collected as close to the source of potential action as possible. States can manipulate incentive systems and enforce standards. Institutions can see goals, establish climates, and reward behavior. Individual teachers, however, can relate teaching to learning, and that is the most important route to the improvement of undergraduate instruction.

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